

Saved by the Belt

The day was 21 June 1998, Father's Day. SGT Barrera had just finished the Sergeant's Course and was traveling with his family from Arizona to Camp Pendleton, CA. He was driving the family van with his wife who was 7 months pregnant, and their 2-year-old daughter. Everything was going well, but something would happen in the next half hour that would leave an unforgettable mark on SGT Barrera and how he viewed life.

SGT Barrera rarely wore his seatbelt and he felt no particular urge to wear it this time either. His wife and daughter were both secured in their car seats.

It was hot outside, but the air-conditioning inside the van made the long trip bearable. The family had been on the road for 10 hours when they reached the Arizona/California border. At the border, the elderly checkpoint worker cautioned SGT Barrera to fasten his seatbelt.

Without much thought, SGT Barrera fastened his belt. His wife and daughter were asleep, and they would soon be in Pendleton in 2½ hours. Less than 30 minutes later, SGT Barrera also fell asleep...at the wheel.

He was suddenly awakened by the sound of the highway rumble strip and the van rocking as it began to leave the road. Instinctively, he turned the wheel in the other direction and the van lurched to the left.

The speed and quick direction change caused the van to roll over two times, landing on its roof 20 yards off the highway. All of the cargo inside the van, with the exception of one suitcase, was violently thrown clear of the van.

Luggage, a huge ice chest, and other belongings were scattered all over the crash scene. All of the windows were shattered and the van was totaled. SGT Barrera's wife was knocked unconscious and his daughter was unhurt, but was frightened and crying. Fortunately, SGT Barrera had fastened his seatbelt and remained behind the wheel during the violent rollover and only received a minor cut to his face.

Three cars arrived on the scene within minutes. Shortly, a California Highway Patrol unit and an air ambulance arrived. Due to the fact that Mrs. Barrera was 7 months pregnant, they airlifted her first in order to monitor the condition of the fetus. She was released after overnight observation, while SGT Barrera and his 2 year-old daughter required no special medical attention. One month later, Mrs. Barrera gave birth to a healthy 9-pound baby boy.

The trauma of this crash left SGT Barrera with a deep appreciation for the power of seatbelts and for a family that he could have lost. He certainly isn't shy about wearing seatbelts now and insists all passengers do the same. He is also a firm believer in getting proper rest before taking a trip. ♦

Courtesy of Jerry Hollenback, Safety Specialist, Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan, DSN 253-5487, hollenbackg@iwakuni.usmc.mil. Mr. Hollenback was told this story while teaching the AAA Driver Improvement Course on base. SGT Barrera is currently stationed at the Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan.

BUCKLE UP!

SAFETY BELTS SAVE LIVES.

